DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 112 668 FL 007 133

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TITLE A Proposed Investigation of Preschool Biliteracy.
PUB DATE 25 May 75
NOTE 11p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS *Bilingual Education; Bilingual Students; Community Attitudes; Early Reading; *English (Second Language); *Mexican Americans; Minority Group Children; *Preschool Children; Preschool Education; Reading Instruction; Sociolinguistics; *Spanish; Spanish Speaking

ABSTRACT

Bilingual schooling in the U.S. is meant to equalize educational opportunity for children of limited English-speaking ability. Despite the proliferation of bilingual programs in many parts of the country, only very modest progress is being made toward the goal of equal educational achievement. We are coming to realize that limited English-speaking children with a 5- to 6-year handicap in English can only very exceptionally catch up. Only if a greater, not just an equal, opportunity is provided, can these children be expected to compete successfully with their English-speaking schoolmates. There are two prerequisites: (1) that limited English-speaking children be given an early start in learning to read, first in their home language and then in English, and (2) that the community accord non-English home languages the same respect as English. The second, involving profound social changes, will take time. Even the first will require years of experimentation. This paper sketches the preliminary steps of a long-term project to test the hypothesis that limited English-speaking children (how many will have to be determined) can learn to read their home language between ages 1 1/2 and 3 and English between 3 and 5. (Author)

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A PROPOSED INVESTIGATION OF PRESCHOOL BILITERACY

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Introduction

Bilingual schooling in the United States is intended primarily to help equalize education for children of limited competence in English. However, despite the proliferation of bilingual programs in many parts of the country,[1] only the most modest progress has so far been made toward the achievement of this goal.

Legislation concerned with bilingual education is also still in its infancy in our country. The Bilingual Education Act of 1967[2] and the Comprehensive Bilingual Education Amendments Act of 1973[3] are both well conceived and can be read in such a way as to favor the maintenance of non-English languages and cultures. However, most of the state bilingual acts that have so far been passed prescribe nothing more than transitional bilingual education, that is, instruction in the children's home language (as well as in English) continued only until their English can bear the burden of instruction, usually not beyond the third grade,[4] or leave the kind of program to local option. One is led to conclude that, whereas on the national level there is a growing respect for other languages and cultures, at the grass roots level we are at best only tolerant of them long enough for children to learn English.

Even with the assistance provided by existing legislation educators are reaching only a small fraction of the children who need bilingual instruction. Senator Cranston of California pointed out in 1973 that there were some 5 million children in our country who needed bilingual education but were not getting it.[5] In California alone there were an estimated 180,000 pupils of Spanish, Asian, or Indian descent in urgent

need of help, with only about 25,000 receiving the necessary assistance.[6] And according to a report issued by the U.S. Civil Rights Commission in 1974, only 70,000 of the 1.6 million Spanish-speaking pupils in the five Southwestern states were receiving bilingual education though they had great language handicaps.[7]

The issue has reached the courts; and in a momentous 9-0 decision in the Lau v. Nichols case the Supreme Court has ruled that 18,000 Chinese-speaking children of San Francisco were not receiving adequate help with their language problem and the San Francisco Public Schools were ordered to correct the situation. The decision read in part: "There is no equality of treatment merely by providing students with the same facilities, text books, teachers and curriculum; for students who do not understand English are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education."[8]

Mexican American Children

My particular concern is the education of Mexican American children in Texas. It is now widely recognized that children from homes in which Spanish is the principal medium of communication often experience a severe handicap when they enter school where English is the exclusive or principal medium of instruction. Their acquisition of knowledge and development of sensori-motor skills, which may have proceeded normally at home through the medium of Spanish, are now arrested or greatly retarded unless they are lucky enough to enter a school with an effective bilingual program. Even so, their learning progress is usually measured in English, and their obvious inferiority to Anglo-American children, in English, frequently undermines their self-esteem. Only rarely are they praised for learning through their best medium, Spanish. As a result, affective learning suffers too,

perhaps even more than their cognitive, perceptual, and motor learning.

Under these circumstances it appears hopeless for the Spanish-dominant child to get an equal educational opportunity in school. We pay lip service to equal education for limited-English-speaking children just as we used to speak, self-deceptively, of "separate but equal" education for Black Americans. It is materially impossible to achieve equality so long as success in school is measured primarily in English and so long as bilingual Americans are made to feel inferior to monolingual English speakers.

Project Goal

What I propose, therefore, is that we so prepare the preschool Mexican American child that he begins school with a readiness to learn that is not only equal but actually superior to that of his English-speaking classmates. Because of his feeling of insufficiency due to his minority status, nothing less can guarantee him equality of educational opportunity. It will be another matter to correct the social and economic inequalities that are so deeply rooted in our society; but if we succeed in correcting educational inequalities, we shall have taken an important first step in curing the pervasive social ills that plague us.

What Research Seems to Show

Language learning begins on the first day of life - if not earlier - as we know from the research of William S. Condon and Louis W. Sander. They report that "bodily responses to human speech are apparent in babies twelve hours old, and may even exist in the womb. Such instinctive responses, the researchers suspect, represent vital steps in learning to talk."[9]

The Condon-Sander research underlines the importance of human

speech as a stimulus to language learning. A similar conclusion emerges from the research of Burton L. White of Harvard.[10] White began by studying children from birth to age six but decided later to focus on the period from birth to three. "If most of the qualities that distinguish outstanding six-year-olds can be achieved in large measure by age three, the focus of the project would be narrowed dramatically. We rather abruptly found ourselves concentrating on the zero-to-three range." According to White, "Children - all children from whatever type of family - seem to be very much alike during the first year of life, but between 10 and 18 months, differences in competencies, especially cognitive abilities, emerged." White declares, with some hyperbole, "It's all over by age three."[11]

These and other researchers lead us to conclude that ages zero to five, and especially zero to three, are the human being's best learning period provided we do not define "learning" as "adult learning."[12]

Early Reading

Buckminster Fuller writes in a prologue to Stevens and Orem's book The Case for Early Reading: "... the preschool child... wants to and will learn to read at home given the opportunity."[13]

The "reading establishment" notwithstanding, Glenn Doman has acquired much valuable experience with early readers, which he sets forth persuasively in his book How to Teach Your Baby to Read.[14] In it he declares: "Children can read words when they are one year old, sentences when they are two, and whole books when they are three - and they love it."[15] He has testimony of many mothers to substantiate this claim. "But," asks Doman rhetorically, "isn't it easier for a child to understand a spoken word rather than a written one? Not

at all," he replies. "The child's brain, which is the only organ that has learning capacity, 'hears' the clear, loud television words through the ear and interprets them as only the brain can. Simultaneously the child's brain 'sees' the big clear television words through the eye and interprets them in exactly the same manner.... It makes no difference to the brain whether it 'sees' a sight or 'hears' a sound. It can understand both equally well. All that is required is that the sounds be loud enough for the ear to hear and the words big enough and clear enough for the eye to see so that the brain can interpret them -- the former we have done but the latter we have failed to do."[16]

In 1965, Ragnhild Söderbergh, a professor of linguistics at the University of Stockholm, undertook to "teach" her two-year-old daughter to read by the Doman method. She reported her success in detail in a book written in English.[17] The experiment was successfully replicated with five more children between the ages of one and a half and three years.[18]

There are other cases of early reading reported in the literature, but it is still only possible to state as a hypothesis that "very young children can and do learn to read," but <u>how many</u> we do not yet know. Nor do we know exactly <u>how</u> it is done by children of different ages and varying backgrounds. All of this we shall have to learn "by doing." What I propose to investigate is the hypothesis that Spanish-dominant children can learn to read Spanish (and understand English) between two and four and to read English between four and six and thus enter school with a readiness to learn that is at least equal to that of the monolingual and often non-reading Anglo American children.

Project Description

The experiment I propose is a cooperative longitudinal study which will require at least six years to yield definitive conclusions.

During the past academic year I have done a considerable amount of background reading, spent several hours a week observing and working with both monolingual and bilingual children between the ages of 15 and 24 months of age in the University Student Day Care Center, and attended weekly meetings with the director and community representatives of the Happy Talk Project of the Austin Independent School District. In the latter project the community representatives made home visits once a week, explained to Mexican American mothers in Spanish how to play with their three-year-old children using educational toys (including large cards with printed words, such as mamá, papá, bebé, the child's name, etc.), and occasionally recorded the child's responses on a tape cassette.

During the academic year 1975-1976 I propose to organize one or more early Spanish-reading pilot projects. Several organizations in Austin and elsewhere have expressed interest in collaborating in the project. Spanish-dominant Mexican American children and interested parents are being identified. Bilingual home-visiting teachers, aides, and volunteers will be selected at the beginning of the academic year. A schedule of operation will include a weekly staff planning session and weekly home visits by a visiting teacher, intern, aide, or volunteer. Procedures will be evolved as we go along but will be based primarily on the techniques described in Doman's book How to Teach Your Baby to Read and accompanying reading kit[19] as well as those described in Söderbergh's Reading in Early Childhood and her reading packet[20] for teaching children who have just learned to talk to read (in Swedish).

Most of the communication with mothers and children will be in Spanish, but without totally avoiding the use of English, for the children will be expected to learn to understand spoken English between the ages of two and four so that they will be ready to learn to read in English between ages four and six. Available medical and technical resources will be used throughout the project, and careful records will be kept of each child's progress.

Conclusion

The views expressed here are, to be sure, somewhat unorthodox, and there are many people who prefer orthodoxy. For example, I am often asked the question: "But why? Even granting that children can and do learn to read at any early age, what advantage is there in it?" The parent who sees no advantage in early reading for a two-year-old child should of course not attempt it. Furthermore, neither a parent's pride in showing off a bright child nor a teacher's ambition to prove a theory ~~is not~~ is a sufficient reason for teaching young children to read. In fact, the only acceptable reason is that the child wants to read and enjoys it. The parent or teacher who watches for signs of a child's interest and is willing to respond to them may legitimately share the child's joy in learning to read. One purpose of the proposed experiment is to try to discover how many signs of children's interest in early reading we may be overlooking. If it turns out that more children want to read than do not want to read at this early age, then we shall have made a small educational advance and perhaps a more important social advance. What appears unorthodox may then in time turn out to be the new orthodoxy.

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